



Photo by Bec Gauvin

The founders of River & Main Theatre company, (from left) Peter Paylor, Lisa Morris and Rick Zimmerman, stand outside at the site of Belleville's newest theatre, named "Theatre in the Wings." This intimate 45 seat theatre is set to open in the heart of downtown Belleville.

# Theatre still waiting in the wings

By Bec Gauvin

Belleville's newest theatre, which was set to open this month, is the latest victim of the rising number of COVID-19 cases.

River & Main, the theatre company behind "Theatre in the Wings," has decided to stop revealing tentative start dates for the new space, and instead intends to develop specifically how rather than when they will open.

"Our first show was going to open Oct. 13, then Oct. 29, then Nov. 15, then Dec. 6. Then we finally decided we were tired of putting a date out there," says Rick Zimmerman, artistic director of the production company.

The 45-seat venue on Bridge Street in the downtown core, with a colourful mural of wings on its street-facing wall, has become a popular spot for photography, prompting intrigue from locals and visitors alike about what is to come. The building has been under renovation in the past year to accommodate its new tenants and their performance plans.

Although it has been dubbed a "Boutique Theatre," Zimmerman and his co-founders, Lisa Morris

and Peter Paylor, insist that it is rather a "Blackbox Storefront Theatre" instead, named for the black stage that sits squarely behind a newly restored proscenium archway.

Zimmerman first founded River & Main Theatre production company in 2017 with friends and fellow purveyors of the arts Morris and Paylor, who make up the production and design and new play development directors respectively.

This location will be the company's first permanent residency, and will entertain a variety of performances, boasting a cutting-edge creative freedom that allows shows to be unlike anything else in the Belleville area.

"The shows might be provoking and all sorts of things. Belleville has been secluded as far as provocative shows go, and there are a lot of people who are interested in being moved in all sorts of different ways. So, we've not limited what may happen," Morris says.

As for adhering to Ontario COVID-19 guidelines, they are uniquely equipped to handle the situation. The small theatre has a maximum seating of 45 people, and guidelines necessitate cutting even that

amount down, but the company isn't worried.

"Because we're flexible and we're doing small shows, especially shows we do with local playwrights, we have an economy where we can work within the COVID limits," says Paylor.

The rights to locally sourced plays are much more affordable than those of its universally known counterparts, therefore allowing the group finances room to be able to perform for smaller audiences. The plan is to be able to have 18-20 people, grouped into their own exposure circles, socially distancing while enjoying a show.

The theatre also intends to roll out a new format of shows that bypass intermission and last about an hour total. "It's what we're calling a good hour of entertainment," says Paylor.

"So, the shows are no more than an hour long in and out, so that there are no intermissions, nobody has to sit around and that we can also do two separate shows a night. I'm of the belief that the two-and-a-half-hour format may be on its way out anyways, between what's happened with COVID and attention span. People are much happier watching shorter pieces... a two-hour play is really a 45-minute play

with an hour and a half of filling anyways."

Not having intermission is just one of the ways Theatre in the Wings is trying to make performances pandemic proof, to eliminate as much risk for exposure as possible while still bringing the community something fun and new. Besides the health reasons, having a shorter running time also helps to make the theatre more accessible to the community.

"People are busy, so this will accommodate them. They can come in, get their fill of something theatrical and still go off and finish up their night," says Morris.

River & Main Theatre company will reassess the possibility of opening in January, but for now plan to handle the problems of the pandemic as they come.

"We want this to be a lively, energetic and entertaining space, but COVID is not the time to be doing that, and we're still going to be dealing with COVID challenges in January and February and March, and maybe April and May, so how we deal with it is going to be the biggest challenge we face," explains Zimmerman.

For now, however, the company remains hopeful and excited at the prospect of this new performance hub.

# Christmas lights brighten up the night

By Madison Ladouceur

As the cold weather approaches, the days get shorter, and the frosty breaths from people walking along the streets of Belleville proves that winter is coming.

As numbers of cases of COVID-19 grow around the world, the have been many concerns around how it was going to affect Christmas.

For the people of Belleville and surrounding areas, a piece of Christmas has been made safely available to them with a drive-through light show and pedicab ride. Taking place from Nov. 20 - Jan. 4, Belleville City Hall committee, including Annis Ross (Chair) and her fellow committee members, have created a scenic five-kilometre drive of holiday cheer with light displays and holiday music.

A Clarington resident visiting Belleville, Nate Naumhauer, spoke about how cool the Festival of Lights was when he came to visit.

"I thought it was awesome to be honest. I love Christmas lights. The memorial about the Foster family was spectacular. The Charlie Brown Christmas was great, and I loved the trees overall. It was very well done, and it was definitely a lot better than I thought it would be."

A little history behind this historical event gives even more meaning towards this beautiful and scenic display. Sixty-two years ago, the family



Photo by Madison Ladouceur

A visitor stops at one of many locations along the Belleville's "Festival of Lights" show that is taking place along the Belleville waterfront. Many locations along the waterfront are sparkling with Christmas lights.

of Billy Foster tragically lost their son in a car accident on Christmas Eve of 1958, also taking the life of Art "Sonny" Culloden, Billy's friend. The Fosters started a light display on the front yard the next year and it has continued to grow.

If you ever get the chance to go see the Festival of Lights, make a day of it, go with a friend or family member. Enjoy the scenic views of the Belleville waterfront and stay safe.

Since then, the Cullodens have been decorating their home in remembrance of him. They have also been starting to send donations to the Festival of Lights displays in Downtown Belleville in his honour.

Many donations have been accepted in the making of this festival, but existing displays continue to shine bright by replacing bulbs and purchasing new displays.

The Belleville Festival of Lights event also included an optional pedicab ride through the displays for an even more magical experience. By appointment, two people per ride, are able to get a surreal experience riding through the displays along the waterfront, until Dec. 19.

Many people have come to take the opportunity to drive through the festival and see the lights, the most notable one being the large display at Meyers Pier, which showcases a beautiful nativity scene, a Charlie Brown Christmas and much more. Also included in the route is a photo opportunity in the large Santa chair located in downtown Belleville along Front Street.

The organizers of the Belleville Festival of Lights and Enchanted have also included a voting option for the top favourite holiday decorations and window contest.